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Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*

Pages: 1-12

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ISSN (print version) 2169-379X

ISSN (online version) 2169-1290

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1156 15th Street NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20005 (202) 452-9545

www.conservation-us.org

Objects Specialty Group Postprints is published annually by the Objects Specialty Group (OSG) of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC). It is a conference proceedings volume consisting of papers presented in the OSG sessions at AIC Annual Meetings.

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This article is published in the *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two, 2015*. It has been edited for clarity and content. The article was peer-reviewed by content area specialists and was revised based on this anonymous review. Responsibility for the methods and materials described herein, however, rests solely with the author(s), whose article should not be considered an official statement of the OSG or the AIC.

ARTIST INTENTION AND THE CONSERVATION OF CONTEMPORARY ART

GLENN WHARTON

This article addresses the use of the term *artist intention* in the conservation of contemporary art. The author draws from work with artists and from literature about intention, creativity, and the influence of social context to build a critical understanding of the term. The context for this research is the ongoing life of artworks in museums, where conservators, curators, and others decide how an artwork should be conserved and how the public should experience it.

Are artists the best source for articulating the intentions they had during the creation of their work? Some argue that artists' intentions during the creative process are not necessarily reflective of their artistic production, as they may not have achieved their intentions. Following this logic, it is best to rely on curators, art historians, conservators, and others to define an artwork's symbolic and aesthetic values based on analyzing the work itself, without interpreting expressions made by the artist. Other scholars argue that we need to go beyond the art object and study the social and material context of production to comprehend its meaning and aesthetic value. Examining conflicting debates in philosophy, literary criticism, art history, and the social sciences complicates using the term *artist intention* in the field of conservation. An argument is made for working with artists to arrive at conservation decisions, but to avoid mistaking artist opinions about problems at hand with expressions of their original intention.

KEYWORDS: Artist, Conservation, Contemporary Art, Intent, Intentions

1. INTRODUCTION

Art conservators strive to honor what they often refer to as artist intention in their work. Using scientific investigation, they identify materials and technologies of production to understand the original appearance and function of works in their care. They join forces with art historians and others to identify aesthetic and symbolic value inscribed in the work by the artist. Conservation is a pragmatic field. Conservators seek to understand artists' concerns to ensure that the public experience of the work is in keeping with the artist's vision. For generations, philosophers and scholars in the social sciences and humanities have debated whether it is possible to understand an artist's intent. Numerous publications address relationships between intention and the physical object of art, the creative process, and the social circumstances of production. The aim of this article is to question, from knowledge of this literature, how the term *artist intention* is used in the field of conservation.

My focus is on contemporary art, where many primary sources are available to conservators, including the artist as a spokesperson for their own ideas. Contemporary art offers a unique object of study for contemplating artist intent in conservation in part because the artist or those who knew the artist are available, but also because much of the art produced today no longer makes a claim of durability and fixity. I limit the scope of this article to variable forms of contemporary art in part for the sake of brevity. There is significant literature on artist intention in conservation¹ to which I do not refer, as my primary interest is in examining how the term is debated in other fields, including philosophy, art criticism, literary criticism, and sociology. Much of this literature is contradictory and virtually impenetrable without a background in the disciplinary theory on which it is built. Just the same, a basic understanding of how this highly contested term is discussed in adjacent fields is helpful in reflecting on its use in conservation.

Before discussing this literature, the use of *artist intention* in conservation needs to be considered. Conservators often employ the term broadly, from reference to ideas in the design and execution of an artwork to thoughts that artists have years later in response to a conservation problem. In this article, I begin with ideas in the artist's mind during the creative process; however, in the end, I come back to use of the term in reference to practical conservation problems.

It is helpful to recognize that attempts to identify the true or authentic nature of an artwork for purposes of conservation have been dismissed in recent conservation literature in recognition that authenticity is subjectively perceived and shifts over time with changes in both the art object itself and the cultural values of people who experience it (Clavir 2002; Laurenson 2006). I embrace these mutable conceptions of authenticity without launching a full defense of their use.

Debates over authenticity and defining what is and is not art are relevant to a larger discussion of artist intention, but I choose to limit the scope of this article and focus on how conservators use the term in reference to their research. I am not attempting to build a coherent argument about artist intention or a philosophical understanding of intentionality.² Instead, my aim is to provide an understanding of various lines of thought that complicate attempts to understand intention in relation to artistic works. My goal is to lay the groundwork for reconsidering, if not replacing, the term *artist intention* in the conservation of contemporary art.

Contemporary art conservators have a growing arsenal of methods through which they can learn from the artist. Hummelen and Scholte (2012) chronicle the development of artist questionnaires and other forms of knowledge transmission from artists to conservators. They reference a rapidly growing literature that provides conservators with models for developing questionnaires, interviewing artists, and archiving data from their investigations. The not-for-profit organization Voices in Contemporary Art (VoCA) trains conservators and other professionals in artist interview workshops. Through their programming, VoCA and other organizations, such as the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art (INCCA), advocate collaborative approaches among professionals to learn from artists.

In my own practice as Media Conservator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA), I spent much of my time building institutional knowledge about artist preferences that will inform future staff in their exhibition of works by these artists and in conservation research. I frequently used the term *artist intent* to characterize the ideas that artists expressed, but always with some trepidation. Considerable time had often passed since they created the work, which meant that I was asking them to recall past intentions to address a current situation. The technical problems at hand were often unanticipated when they created the works, such as digitizing analog media or emulating software-based works. I came to see the term as charged and ambiguous, and any chance of retrieving or articulating intention as an improbable task.

I also realized that although I was generally interested in their original intention for the artwork, my real concerns were about practical problems. I sought their opinions on current options for treatment and display. Sometimes I realized that their responses reflected other concerns in their mind, including their present career advancement and their future reputation. As described by van Saaze (2009), the knowledge produced during our interviews was “co-produced,” in that my framing of topics and guiding the conversation influenced what they said. These recognitions of additional agendas and my own impact on what was said further complicated my references to their comments as expressions of original intent.

Should the term *artist intention* in the conservation of contemporary art be replaced? In the following four sections, I discuss issues that complicate its use before returning to consider its replacement in the conclusion.

2. THE INTENTIONAL FALLACY

Are artists the best sources for understanding meaning embedded in their work? Arguments against asking artists include the concern that they are haunted by original ideas that they tried to express rather than what they actually did express. Critics may argue that they did not achieve their intentions. If this is

the case, fabricators, collaborators, art historians, scientists, conservators, and social scientists may be better equipped to discuss what the work should look like and how it should be presented.

Scholars in many fields write about the relationship between intention and creative objects. By far, the most influential publication of relevance is Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1946 essay *The Intentional Fallacy*. Their concern is whether critical assessment of literary works should be judged by how well the author achieved their intentions. They believe that "the intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 468). They argue that a work should be judged by itself and that looking beyond it shifts attention from the text itself, which is the best source of information. The implication of this argument for conservation is that we should use the physical work of art as our sole source for understanding it rather than artist statements about its meaning. This argument squares well with positivist approaches in scientific conservation research that derive all needed information from material analysis.

The Intentional Fallacy spawned a generation of literary and art criticism that lasted well into the 1960s, known as New Criticism. These critical theorists advocate close reading of texts and artworks, and reject interpretation based on outside influences, such as statements from authors and artists. Many of these scholars develop nuanced arguments about the role of intention in the creative process. Wimsatt, Beardsley, and their followers became known as *anti-intentionalists*, whereas those who argued that artists' mental states and behavioral dispositions should be considered in interpreting artworks were labeled *intentionalists*.

Steve Dykstra is one of the few conservators who addresses *The Intentional Fallacy* in his writing (Dykstra 1996). He takes on the task of breaking down its implications for paintings conservation practice. Dykstra expands on different variations of artist intent and attempts to make sense of them for conservators. Using the cleaning controversies of the 20th century as a backdrop, he divides the opposing sides into camps: *scientific conservators*, who believe in knowing a work through scientific means, and *aesthetic conservators*, who use aesthetics and social science to understand an artwork. He further examines the agency of the artwork itself to function independently from artist intention by creating emotional, psychological, and social effects. He also references the artwork's intention when we perceive its need to be displayed one way or another.

In the end, Dykstra (1996) stakes a claim by supporting all sides and concluding that interpreting artist intent in conservation is an interdisciplinary task, potentially involving historians, critics, connoisseurs, philosophers, scientists, and conservators. It requires scientific analysis, philosophical and psychological understanding of the artist, as well as sociological and art historical contextualization to identify artist intention for the purpose of conservation. Although his focus is on historical art, he recognizes the importance of engaging the artist in contemporary art research.

Paul Eggert might agree with Dykstra. As a scholar and practicing editor, Eggert writes about parallels between the work of editors and conservators. He engages in various contemporary debates about authorship and artist intention in an analysis that leads to a deeply nuanced understanding of the role that artists' stated intention plays in conservation research and decision making (Eggert 2009, 105–108). He suggests that statements of intention by artists should influence the conservator's understanding and contextualization of an artwork but that they need redefinition to become applicable. This redefinition that conservators must undertake inevitably deprives the artist statements of their capacity to encompass the wholeness or integrity of the work. Following this declaration that conservators must redefine artists' stated intentions, Eggert leads his reader back to the artwork itself and its agency as a source for conservation research. Yet inevitably there are competing agencies that have to be balanced even within the artwork that complicate conservation research. In the end, he suggests that conservators should not forget that most viewers are interested in the artist's agency, or statements of intention. This brief distillation of Eggert's writing does not capture his remarkable intelligence and sophistication, but it serves our purpose of further communicating the complexity of contemporary writing about interpreting artist intentions in adjacent fields.

3. INTENTION AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Creation is often described as a process of translating a mental image into form. There are many variations on this theme, and discussion about the relationship between the idea in an artist's mind and the physical manifestation of their creative work is highly contested. For instance, scholars debate whether images of an artwork in an artist's mind exist apart from the act of creation. Artists describe the creative process in many ways, no doubt reflecting the diversity of artistic practices. Michelangelo famously evoked an image of sculpting as releasing a sculpture from a block of stone. Artists with whom I have worked deny a total prefiguring of an artwork in their minds. They describe having an initial idea or image that evolves in tandem with production. In a seminal lecture titled "The Creative Act," Duchamp describes the creative process in these terms:

In the creative act, the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions. His struggle toward the realization is a series of efforts, pains, satisfactions, refusals, decisions, which also cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the esthetic plane.

The result of this struggle is a difference between the intention and its realization, a difference that the artist is not aware of.

Consequently, in the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap which represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention; this difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal "art coefficient" contained in the work. (Duchamp 1957, 139)

Christian Scheidemann, a conservator who frequently works with artists to research methods and materials in their art production, evokes a similar process. He suggests that many artists describe their ideas as evolving from materials and processes, and that they rarely have preconceived images of the final product. He expands on Graham Wallas's four stages of creativity: from preparation to incubation, illumination, and verification (Scheidemann 2010). During preparation, the artist may research a particular subject, but the subject matter is internalized into the unconscious mind during the incubation phase. The idea emerges from preconscious to awareness during the illumination phase. It is transformed into visual being during the final process of completion, or verification. These four phases may be criticized as being too linear, and they certainly vary from artist to artist, but they provide another model that further complicates the notion of fixed intention prior to creating a work of art.

Artist ideas continue to evolve even after a work is first exhibited. This is especially true for installations and performances that are inherently variable. An example of this is the case of Marianne Vierø's installation, *Indoor Gardening* (fig. 1). Students in my 2012 seminar, "The Museum Life of Contemporary Art," interviewed Vierø about the four times the work had been installed in the past. She changed the materials and their spatial relationships for each installation. She commented that she was working out problems in her mind with each iteration. By the fourth installation, she had resolved her questions and decided that it could now be re-presented with less variability. In fact, she mentioned that after working through these problems, she was less engaged with the work and had moved on to solving new artistic problems.

This change in Vierø's engagement with concerns about the materials and their display signals a shift in her relationship with the work. It has not yet been acquired by a collector or an institution; however, if it is acquired in the future, it may be difficult for her to immerse herself back into these concerns if she is interviewed about its display. This example directs our thinking toward the creative process as problem solving, along with artist relationships to these problems over time.



Fig. 1. Four installation images. Marianne Vierø, *Indoor Gardening*, 2009–2011, painted wood, book, ceramic, glass, plastic, dimensions variable (Courtesy of Marianne Vierø)

4. INTENTION AND CHANGES OVER TIME

It is helpful to consider change over time in framing a discussion of artist intention in conservation. For this, I borrow the model of object biography that is used in the fields of anthropology and sociology. This model recognizes physical change as well as an accumulation of meaning as an object travels through time and to new physical locations (Kopytoff 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999). The model of object biography has already been applied to the conservation of contemporary art to help us understand how meanings attributed to artworks change throughout their lives due to changes in their physical state, their use, and their social, cultural, and historical context (van de Vall et al. 2011). As depicted in figure 2, artworks can experience different life stages from creation and initial display to acquisition, documentation, storage, exhibition, loan, and conservation intervention. The point of this diagram is to highlight various moments in an artwork's life when conservation research and decision making takes place. These are moments when artists are contacted for their opinions. Any of these stages present opportunities for working with artists to understand their concerns about representation and to revisit questions of meaning and materiality. Stages such as exhibition and loan are often repeated in variations that benefit from new information. As conservators well know, conservation intervention may take place at any life stage.

Conservation Moments in the Life of Contemporary Art

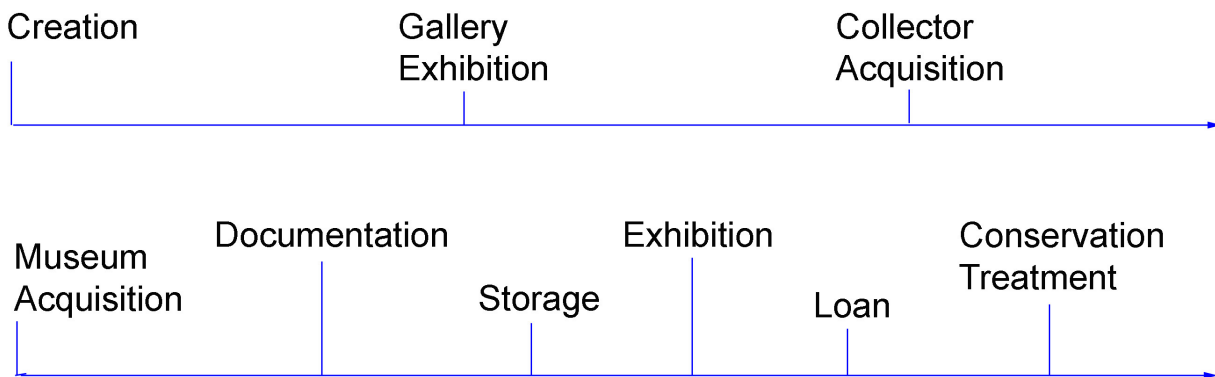


Fig. 2. Life stages of an artwork when conservators contact artists for their opinions about conservation and display (Courtesy of Glenn Wharton)

In her writing about conservation and materiality in conceptual art, Sanneke Stigter provides examples of artists' views that evolve along with their changing artistic interests over the life of the work. In one case that she analyzed, the Dutch artist Ger van Elk rearticulated his thoughts about an artwork as he responded to replacing altered photographic material and adapting a site-specific work to another site, 35 years after fabrication (Stigter 2009). She points out that artists' ideas about how a past work should be conserved are influenced by artistic problems that they are currently working out. Artists not only change their minds and their interests, they respond differently to new circumstances. Years later, they may not even remember the ideas they had during the design and execution of their work. In fact, can we really expect anyone to articulate the same idea decades later?

Artworks that are meant to be reinterpreted for each iteration are considered variable. For these works, museums and other owners develop the capacity to make their own interpretive decisions as they gain an understanding of the variability inscribed by the artist. Yet many artists maintain creative relationships with their prior works even after the moment of sale. Some savvy artists specify in contracts that they or their designees must be present and have decision-making authority at each installation. Given the labor and per diem costs involved in such an arrangement, museums and collectors may elect to negotiate these terms. In some cases, a "weaning" process evolves. Artists and their agents may be brought in during the first few installations, but over time the interpretive capacity of the owner grows as knowledge is transferred from the artist.

Reactive Books by John Maeda poses another challenge regarding artist ideas over time (fig. 3). Originally conceived as interactive computational "books" that the public could purchase on CD-ROMs and interact with on their home computers, Maeda worked with MoMA staff to reconceive them for exhibition when they were acquired by the museum. They are currently exhibited with interactive devices that respond to input from keyboards, microphones, and video cameras. Museum visitors witness changing graphic compositions on monitors that respond to their interaction.

I worked with students from the 2010 Handling Complex Media class in the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program at New York University to interview Maeda about original, current, and future technologies associated with the works. When we discussed future changes in exhibition technology, Maeda said that the exhibition equipment was not important to him. He suggested that we make a video recording of people interacting with the works and exhibit the video in the future rather than keep the software and hardware operational.



Fig. 3. John Maeda, *The Reactive Square*, 1994, 10-key numeric keypad, microphone, software, LCD monitor, flat screen monitor, 460.2006.1-2; *Flying Letters*, 1995, track pad, software, LCD monitor, flat screen monitor, 461.2006.1-2; *12 o'clocks*, 1996, software, LCD monitor, flat screen monitor, 462.2006.1-2; *Tap, Type, Write*, 1998, alpha-numeric keyboard, software, LCD monitor, flat screen monitor, 463.2006.1-2; *Mirror, Mirror*, 2006, 10-key numeric keypad, video camera, software, LCD monitor, flat screen monitor, 71.2007. Dimensions variable. Museum of Modern Art, gift of the designer with additional support from Samsung. (Courtesy of Glenn Wharton)

I was initially surprised by this remark. How could an artist suggest such a radical alteration? On later reflection, I realized that if the thrill of discovery through interaction is key to appreciating the work, and future generations do not experience a thrill in interacting with old technologies, then perhaps

watching people experiencing this thrill better communicates the essence of the work. Exhibiting video documentation may better transmit the authenticity of experience. By exhibiting the work with original equipment, MoMA might risk becoming a museum of archaic technology and miss communicating the core concept of experience. An argument could be made that exhibiting a video of people interacting with the *Reactive Books* is a more authentic conservation act, but my point here is to illustrate the complex relationships between artist ideas and their works through the passage of time.

5. INTENTION AND THE EXTERNAL CONTEXT OF CREATION

While scholars referenced in the prior sections are concerned with relationships between ideas in the artist's mind and the work they produce, others focus on how external forces such as social environment, available materials, and current technologies influence the creative process. This realm of research makes it clear that artist intention cannot be disentangled from the social and material circumstances of production. A few examples of scholarship on these external agents follow.

Martin Heidegger extends Aristotle's doctrine on causality in his analysis of objects coming into being (Heidegger 1993). Through the example of a silver chalice, the silversmith is seen as bringing together the potentialities of the silver in the form of a chalice through a process in which the material, the form, the context, and the thought all give themselves up to the existence of the chalice. Although his analysis leads the reader into deeper philosophical territory, for our somewhat reductive purposes we can point to Heidegger as carrying forward Aristotle's focus on the material itself as one of the four causes or explanations of object creation. Silver has physical qualities that influence the artist's ideas, design, and fabrication.

Just as materials influence the creative process, technical innovations also impact artists' ideas. An example of this can be seen in the evolution of moving image and media technologies. Early in the 20th century, film artists began to experiment with depicting movement, and they added color and audio as new technologies emerged. Today, media artists create born digital multichannel works based on source code and digitally produced imagery. These quickly changing technologies influence the creative impulse of artists by allowing new avenues of exploration.

Some scholars focus on the influence of political and cultural climate on creativity and art production. For example, as post-modern theory, relativism, and the politics of multiculturalism became dominant in cultural discourse during the late 20th century, many artists questioned social structures of power in their creative work. Questioning authority also led to participatory forms of art that give voice to normally disenfranchised populations. This distribution of creative authority through introducing multiple voices further complicates attempts to articulate the artist's intention.

In *Patterns of Intention*, art historian Michael Baxandall (1985) investigates ways in which we attempt to understand the minds or intentions of artists from other cultures and historical periods. He analyzes statements that critics make about paintings through their use of language and asks what actually goes on when we think about the intentions of an artist from another time. He steers away from the intentionalist debate about authorship referenced earlier in this article, as well as any sociological analysis of art production, such as those mentioned in the following. Yet in his nuanced argument for "inferential criticism," Baxandall repeatedly references cultural influence and the difficulty that later critics have in understanding it:

[P]ainters cannot be social idiots: they are not somehow insulated from the conceptual structures of the cultures in which they live. (Baxandall 1985, 71)

It is usual, when discussing the "understanding" of other cultures and actors in them . . . to start from a distinction between *participants'* understanding and *observers'* understanding. The participant understands and knows his culture with immediacy and spontaneity the observer does not share. He can act within the culture's standards and norms without rational self-consciousness. . . . He moves with ease and delicacy and creative flexibility within the rules of his culture. . . . The observer does not have this kind of knowledge of the culture. (Baxandall 1985, 109)

Sociologists often take a more structural approach that provides other complications to identifying artist intention. In his classic book *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker (1984) describes the creative process as inextricably linked to social networks such as art supply manufacturers, fabricators, dealers, critics, collectors, and at times, conservators. Becker argues that art making is an inherently collective enterprise that is not guided by a single actor's intent. Social scientist Bruno Latour (2005) further claims that any work is the result of an "assemblage," not in the art world sense of putting things together, but in the sociological sense of everything being a result of diverse actors operating with what can be very diverse purposes.

For instance, many media artists today work with teams of people with diverse technical skills, such as videographers, editors, programmers, and producers. Sometimes these artists claim single authorship over all of this input, and other times they recognize co-authorship in this team approach to art making. In either case, artist intention is not only influenced by emerging media technologies but also by the creative minds of many contributors.

Yet another concern about external influences on creativity is the conventions that exist in any society. Common assumptions can remain unspoken—for instance, about display and conservation strategies. Philosopher Sherri Irvin (2005) writes about the social context of an artwork in terms of "implicit sanctions" or "tacit assumptions" that may not be expressed but should be considered when researching artist intention. She provides an example of an artist creating a painting in an environment in which the norm is to hang it against a wall. In our culture, paintings are not normally exhibited on the floor or hung upside down. When asked about how to display the work, artists do not think of providing an explicit directive to hang it right side up on a wall, nor does anyone think to ask. These unspoken intentions are socially constructed and "black boxed" in the artist's culture, and they add another dimension to any quest to understand an individual artist's intention, especially for those living in another time or place.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus far, I have questioned the broad use of the term *artist intention* in the conservation of contemporary art by providing multiple and often conflicting examples of how it is debated and understood in various scholarly fields. Philosophers since Aristotle have attempted to clarify relationships between ideas in artists' minds and the products of their work. Critical theorists argue that it is a mistake to interpret art through artist-expressed intentions, and that one should not look for sources outside of the object to understand its meaning. Social scientists, on the other hand, suggest that understanding the cultural context of production is essential to understanding intention embedded in a work of art. Others focus on how art materials and technologies influence artists' ideas and their creative processes.

Adding changes in artist interests over time and the problem of reducing mental pictures into language further complicates the task of defining intention. In addition, people say things according to the situation at hand. Depending on the context of an interview, artists may describe their work in ways that appeal to curators, collectors, or the media rather than respond honestly about what they were trying to achieve in the studio. For instance, they may prefer speaking about ideas associated with their current work in the presence of a curator who may acquire or exhibit their new work in the future. Additionally, they may say things to disguise the fact that they simply do not remember what they were thinking when they made the artwork.

Given all of these complications, seeking to define artist intention for the purpose of conservation can easily be seen as naïve and ill advised. At minimum, *artist intention* is an ambiguous term that conservators should use with caution. Yet conservation is a field in which actions must be taken based on best available information, and artists are a very good resource for information leading to

conservation decisions. They will no doubt continue to be a primary source in research for conservation and display of their work.

Should conservators replace the term *artist intention*? It is a matter of clearly defining how the term is used, as well as the objectives of specific research projects. If conservators use the term in reference to artists' "opinions," "directives," "guidelines," or perhaps "sanctions" (Irvin 2005) regarding conservation interventions or exhibition procedures, then it takes on an applied definition that is particular to the field of conservation. In this case, artists respond to artworks in their present condition, given problems at hand or anticipated problems in the future. As a profession, we may agree that conservation has its own, legitimate use of the term that differs from how scholars in other fields use it. On the other hand, if the research aim is to investigate symbolic value attributed to the artwork by the artist during creation, then the using the term is in line with how it is used by scholars across many disciplines.

Whether the term *artist intention* is replaced or not, conservators should avoid using it naïvely. Any quest for understanding artist intention, whether by asking the artist, their collaborators, scientists, critics, historians, or social scientists, should be based on an understanding of the complex relationships between ideas in artists' minds, diverse influences on their work, and the art that they create.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank artists Marianne Vierø and John Maeda for providing their thoughts about their work and for their openness to classroom interviews. I also express my gratitude to the students who interviewed them, Elizabeth Barbeau, Joe Galluci, and Kristen Hudson, along with Mona Jimenez, whose Moving Image Archiving and Preservation class at New York University (NYU) led the interview with John Maeda. The content of this article developed over time in tandem with my work at MoMA and my teaching at NYU, and it reflects the many conversations I have had with artists, colleagues, and students. I am also indebted to friends, colleagues, and editors who read drafts of this manuscript and provided invaluable critique, including Sarah Barack, Jim Coddington, Kari Dodson, Emily Hamilton, Hanna Hölling, Michele Marincola, Harvey Molotch, Matt Skopek, and Cybele Tom.

NOTES

1. Historical examples of writing on artist intention in conservation literature can be found in "Part II: The Original Intent of the Artist" (Stanley-Price et. al. 1996) and in more recent writing by Gordon and Hermens (2013).
2. Readers who want to explore philosophical treatment of intention and intentionality may choose to start with the influential book *Intention* (Anscombe 1963).

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